

When Young Women Look at the Elderly...

By Lalaine P. Viado

“I suppose that once she had had a virginal waist, a graceful bearing, and profile worthy of a medallion, but by the time I met her she was already a rather bizarre old woman with shoulders rounded into two gentle humps and with white hair coiled around a sebaceous cyst the size of a pigeon egg crowning her noble head.”

Isabel Allende, *Stories of Eva Luna*

The images of older women in most literature are premised on the physical contrast between them and the younger women. As in the quotation above, young women are generally considered virginal, graceful and beautiful, unlike older women who are even thought of as bizarre. Such stereotypical body images reflect social prejudices. Deterioration, physical and otherwise, is associated with aging and consequently older people are regarded as a liability in society. Older women feel they are treated as nothing but obsolete living individuals, and they resent it.

Following is a report on a round of interviews conducted with the following young women:

1. **Shameen Ahmad** is a 19-year old from Afghanistan. She is a member of Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Since Shameen does not speak English, questionnaires were first translated into Persian and the answers into English.

2. **Khumar Huseynova** is a 25-year old medical doctor and member of the Azerbaijan Medical Association.

3. **Amanda Smith**, 21, is from Fiji and is a member of Youthemedia.

4. **Misumi Taeko** works at the Department of Behavioural Science Faculty of Arts and Letters of Tohoku University in Japan.

5. **Cheekay Cinco**, 25, is from the Philippines. She is Project Administrator of the Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC).

6. A young Nepali woman requested for her name and age to be withheld.

The objective was to survey their perceptions of older women and the roles they play in the family and in society. The respondents are members and youth partners of the Network of Asia Pacific Youth (NAPY).

Who are the older women you encounter in your life?

Ahmad: The women I encounter everyday are the ones who have several years of political experience with RAWA [the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan]. Some are leaders and some are active members.

Huseynova: Men and women between the ages of 60 to 65.



Smith: My grandmother, aunts and other relatives. Women you and I happen to meet on the street.

Taeko: My parents and my friends' parents.

Cinco: My mother, her friends, aunts, grand-aunts and other relatives. Mothers and grandmothers of my friends. Some of the women I've met in Seoul, mostly professors.

Young Nepali woman (YNW): My mom, mom-in-law and my grandmom. I live with my mom-in-law. I was living with my mom before marriage and I visit my grandmom very often as she lives nearby.

How do they spend their time?

Ahmad: They spend their time mostly at RAWA meetings and activities such as organising functions, demonstrations, printing and publicity work of our journal *The Message of Woman*. They conduct nursing and literacy courses for women in Pakistan and Afghanistan and other home-based courses. They mobilise other women and raise their awareness, travel abroad, constantly study and analyse the political situation in Afghanistan. Most of them have their own families. Besides the above work, they raise their chil-

dren, do household chores, maintain relations with friends and relatives and mobilise them towards the struggle against Jahadi and Talibi fundamentalism. It is worth mentioning that some of them (the older women) have barely enough time for all these activities.

Huseynova: They travel or take care of their grandchildren.

Smith: They stay at home, clean, cook, sew, take care of grandchildren, watch television and some are sick in bed or hospital.

Taeko: Some are still working. Others are doing the things they want to do such as going to computer school and/or learning English.

Cinco: Most of them are still working (like my mother, at 61). Some have retired from work and opted to stay at home to take care of their children and grandchildren. They have found their careers, hobbies and other things and these have kept them busy. My mother, whose life is most familiar to me, spends most of her week working. Her weekends are spent with the family and/or simply relaxing. She occasionally goes out with her friends to go dancing, shopping or simply to have dinner.



Other relatives and family friends who fall under the category of “older women” spend most of their days taking care of their homes and grandchildren.

YNW: My mom works, she’s a professor. My mom-in-law stays at home, she has a husband to look after and she is in charge of the house and in ensuring conduct of religious rituals in the family. Same with my grandma, she takes care of her husband and attends to family affairs. With so many religious activities to be performed, these older Hindu women do not have to worry about how they should spend their time. In a way such practices save them from the depression that women from other cultures may have after their children have grown and start questioning their worth besides being mothers. In our culture, old age comes with the responsibility of pleasing the deities to make place in heaven for them and making sure the family follows the tradition.

What is your everyday interaction with them?

Ahmad: Our daily talks with them are mainly about political issues (Afghanistan and the world situation), on RAWA’s work and about our daily activities. They give us advice on improving our work. We also talk about some

of our personal issues such as family problems, and they help us as much as they can. In addition, we talk about marriage and the oppression of the Afghan women within it.

Huseynova: It’s “hello-goodbye.” Sometimes I ask them about their health.

Smith: Talking to them, helping them when they need things done, visiting them in hospital, asking for advice or help or just to share a joke.

Taeko: No everyday interaction with them.

Cinco: I live with my mother so I see her every day though we are both busy with our jobs. We make it a point to spend Sundays with the family so I catch up with her on weekends. We share one big room at our house, with our separate spaces, of course. I have always insisted on this arrangement because I want to be on hand if my mom needs anything.

I don’t see many older women in my daily life other than my mother. But when I do encounter them (usually in family gatherings and in the work environment), I become a little more formal, more reverent. I do not

feel uncomfortable in the presence of older women, but I often feel that I have to be more sensitive—there are some topics in conversation and/or behaviour that I feel they will have a hard time accepting.

YNW: In the culture where I come from, older people have their say and may demand some respect from the youngsters. It's not really saying that we agree with everything they say but as much as possible we pretend to listen and try to obey. With my mom and grandmom I can argue and win sometimes if I want to, but with my mom-in-law there is absolutely no "questioning." SHE HAS THE POWER!!!

Imagine yourself at the age of 60. What will life be like for you?

Ahmad: I wish to remain as active and as dedicated as I am now with RAWA. I wish to be like the older members when I am at the age of 60. I wish to be a good teacher and mother to young children, just like what the older members are to us now. I hope to remain very strong against all the difficult circumstances I may face in my life.

Huseynova: I hope I will still be working and continue to operate on people in medical clinics and hospitals.

Smith: Hopefully retired and writing a book based on life experiences. Taking long cruises on cruise liners or just staying at home and spending time with my family.

Taeko: I hope my life will still be challenging.

Cinco: Hopefully a lot more settled and very content. I do not plan to get married so I'm prepared to be by myself at the age of 60. I do not expect to have children who will take care of me when I grow old. Even if I did have

children, I would not obligate them to take care of me in my old age. I want to have a quiet life when I'm old, but I also want to have an active life. I want to be involved in various hobbies or volunteer work, and I expect to be still surrounded by my friends.

YNW: As I plan to be working till I can, life in the 60s should be as exciting for me. Maybe I will have a more peaceful and relaxed attitude towards life and with the wisdom that will come with my greying hair, I would love to be one happy old woman.

How would you like to relate to younger people when you get older?

Ahmad: The young generation is the future of a country and the same is true with our organisation, RAWA. Therefore good care and education of the youth are very important because they would be of great help to our people and to RAWA. At 60, besides having good and nurturing relations with them, I'll also work towards their patriotic education.

Huseynova: I hope I will be more laid-back. I would encourage them to seek more knowledge than I have been able to do. I wouldn't be stingy with advice.

Smith: Provide them as much advice as possible on life. I guess being a role model for them to look up to and learn from. Being someone who seems to have the answers to just about everything.

Taeko: I would like to keep being interested in their culture and in the way they think and feel.

Cinco: I'd like to think that when I grow old, I will be able to relate with younger people as

equals—that is, I will not expect any special treatment or added respect because of my age. I would like to be the kind of older person whom younger people can be comfortable being with.

YNW: I really would like to be careful in the way I relate to youngsters when I'm old. My attitude would be "I've had my life and learned my lessons. Let them live their own lives and learn." I believe that everyone wants to learn from his or her own mistakes. We never agreed to learn only from our elders, did we? Life would certainly be less complicated if we did but then less interesting too!

The responses reported above reflect the variety of interactions and relationships that the six young women have with older people in their lives. Some commonalities, however, can be gleaned.

The young respondents look at the older people in their lives not only as functioning individuals but more importantly as active members of society. They partake in various aspects of social, political and cultural life. This contradicts the fallacious notion of older people hopelessly lying in their sickbeds and merely exhausting welfare services from their communities. Though they themselves need care and attention, older women continue to be caregivers. They take care of grandchildren and look after the family's well-being as they continue to attend to their usual reproductive functions such as cooking, cleaning and sewing. In addition, older women are also located in productive spheres, as economic actors in the course of their paid work, although at some point they are expected to retire. In the case of Afghanistan, they also serve as a powerful force towards a country's transformation.

Depending on their economic, social, political and cultural contexts, older women also find time for self-development, leisure travel and healthy social life. In the case of Japan for instance, older people would take computer and/or English courses.

They may also take the lead role in observing religious traditions and cultural practices in the family and elsewhere. Such a role, however, could influence the quality of their interaction with the younger women, especially when power relationships are involved (with a daughter-in-law as in the Nepali case or a co-worker like the Philippine respondent).

Given this, the young women would like to learn from their elders particularly with regard to visualising their own old age. The desire to continue having a useful and challenging life is apparent in their hopes to keep on working, at home or outside, and to maintain an active lifestyle (such as taking long cruises and even writing a book, in the case of the respondent from Fiji). They also wish to enjoy healthy and nurturing relationships with younger people, even treating them as co-equals.

All these they hope to do while surrounded by family, friends and/or fellow activists with whom they could share the wisdom gained through the years. ☺

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